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A Message from History

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A MESSAGE FROM HISTORY

Towards the close of the twenty-eighth century before Christ, or well-nigh five millennia before our own time, when the world was still young, there lived in the great city of Memphis on the bank of Father Nile in Middle Egypt a man by the name of Ptah-Hotep who had risen from the ranks of the people to the highest dignity in the lands ruled by the immortal Pharaohs. In the eyes of his contemporaries, he stood in great esteem for his deeds as Grand Vizier of the strongest and most civilized country of his day. We know very little about the details of his achievements in Pharaoh's administration to which he owed his fame in his lifetime. Indeed, his name would have passed unnoticed by future generations, had it not been for a minor incident in his own private life. Ptah-Hotep, who had only one son whom he dearly loved, wanted to ensure for that son as much profit and pleasure of life as he had had out of it himself. Thus, at the age of one hundred and ten years when, in his own words, "the limbs begin to ache and old age emerges as a new phase," he set himself to the task of writing forty-three maxims to lead the way for his son. It is this rather private document that has helped to perpetuate the memory of Ptah-Hotep's name in the annals of mankind. The discovery of this Book of Wisdom on papyrus scrolls in the Hieroglyphs of the Old Kingdom was regarded as a literary event. It has been transliterated, translated into modern languages, and published with extensive commentaries proving its impact on the composition of the later Proverbs of King Solomon in the Old Testament. As we peruse that ancient text, we realize at once that the fundamentals of human nature have not changed very much from time immemorial. The adages of the son of Memphis in the year 2750 B.C. could very well be reiterated with effect to the sons of Utah in this year of grace A.D. 1956.

Commencement is a memorable landmark in the student's career. It is the end of one chapter and the beginning of another in the long book of life. At this dividing line, with his eyes fixed on a future enveloped in the mist of distant years ahead, the student's soul thirsts for a word of guidance and encouragement

from an older person with more experience — some sage with a message from history which may aid him at the threshold of a new adventure. When your eminent President Dr. Olpin invited me to deliver this message to you, realizing that I was no sage, I hesitated. As a historian, however, I readily accepted the honor; since a historian can tap the heritage of accumulated wit and wisdom of our forefathers for the benefit of our present fellow men. Let us remember that the ancients were greater masters of the art of contemplation and meditation than ourselves. In those olden times, when the day's work was done and the shades lengthened, men retired to ruminate over the enduring issues of life and the spirit in the stillness of a world lost to us. It is in that wholesome atmosphere that Ptah-Hotep composed his Proverbs for his son and for the sons of all time. It behooves a man who aims at success in life, he argues, to be modest, of few words, just, generous, of good counsel, loyal, patient, deferential towards his superiors, righteous, loving to his wife and family, and adamant in the practice of moderation.

To those who have just terminated their university education, it is befitting to quote verbatim the first of the sayings of Ptah-Hotep. "Be not arrogant about thy knowledge, and pride not thyself that thou art a man of learning. Take counsel with the unlettered as with the learned, for the limits of art cannot be reached, and no artist is perfect in his excellence. Goodly discourse is more hidden than the precious green stone, and yet it is found with slave-girls over mill-stones."

In this wise, he warns his son against intellectual snobbery. If Ptah-Hotep were standing on this platform to-day, I feel confident that he would tell you that the degree which you have just earned after years of unremitting toil is only the commencement and not the final goal in your edification.

Now let me read a short selection of excerpts from the remaining chapters of this Book of Wisdom for those who have ears and are able to listen.

"Speak only when thou knowest thou canst resolve the doubt. He who giveth good counsel is an artist, for speech is more difficult than any craft."

"Hold fast to truth and transgress her not. Verily the satisfaction of a grudge is not told to a man's credit. Quarrel with no man great or small, for that is abomination."

"If thou art a leader, be kind in hearing the speech of a suppliant. . . . The complainant setteth greater store by the easing of his mind than by the accomplishment of that for which he came. . . . To listen kindly comforteth the heart."

"If thou art a leader, ruling the multitude, strive after every excellence, that thy conduct may be without fault. Great is righteousness, and its worth abiding. . . . Wrong-doing hath never brought its venture safe to port."

"Beware of covetousness. . . . No man can consort therewith. It setteth division between fathers and mothers, and between brothers by the same mother. It parteth wife and husband. It is a handful of every evil, as it were a bag of everything hateful. A man shall thrive if he be truly righteous. But the covetous man shall have no tomb."

The words of Ptah-Hotep have resounded across the centuries from Memphis to Utah filled with hope on this day of commencement. Hope has been the most cherished message of my own life. The little that I may have achieved in a long career may be ascribed to hope, coupled with vision, determination, industry, sacrifice and faith. "Nil desperandum" — the mediaeval equivalent of the modern "Never say die!" — has been my luminous motto in my darkest hours; and, God knows, I had plenty of them. The Romans used to say "Per aspera ad astra!" which meant that they could reach the stars through hope. It is good to aim at the stars, but be happy and contented when only you reach the top of the tree. If you can outlive defeat and rise to try again, you will eventually attain your aim.

Nowadays, we live in an age of spiritual crisis, and the modern youth is often tempted to slight the wisdom of the ancients and even forget God and depart from religion to materialistic ideology. I firmly believe that these leanings are at the root of our moral discomfiture; and the loftiest of our worldly virtues are only a poor substitute to the God of your Pilgrim Fathers.

How different the world would be if young people accepted the advice tendered to them since the third century before Christ by King Solomon in the Book of Ecclesiastes!

"Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth

"While the evil days come not,

"Nor the years draw nigh,

"When thou shalt say, 'I have no pleasure in them.' "

Let me recount before you the story of a recent event which, though sometimes misinterpreted, may nevertheless be considered as one of those specks of light on our horizon of hope destined to help in the dissipation of the darkness of the Age of the Atomic Bomb. In April 1954, a group of well-meaning Muslims of all sects and Christians of all denominations, derived from some twenty-five countries, of whom the speaker was one, met at Bhamdoun in the Lebanon to discuss the spiritual problems facing humanity and seek a solution. This was perhaps the first time in history that a Convention of that nature came into being since the Crusades. I need hardly recapitulate the lengthy and elaborate deliberations of that council of spiritual leaders and thinkers. The outcome of the movement was, however, formulated in a Covenant solemnly signed by all members, and which I propose to read to you.

"The Muslim-Christian Convocation at Bhamdoun believes that the fundamental conflict of our times results partly from the failure of people to avail themselves of the spiritual assets of religion. Even among those countries which have least been affected by this failure, oppression has frequently been inflicted by the powerful on the feeble, the stronger nations failing to recognize and respect the rights and aspirations of weaker nations. In this situation, we who believe in God and try to abide by His commandments must face the currents of atheism and materialism which have permeated all communities and nations.

"The Convocation has emphasized that there is a large area in which fruitful cooperation can be developed between the two faiths of Islam and Christianity. We both believe in the one God. While holding strongly to our respective convictions, we believe that we can mutually collaborate in opening up effective channels for transmitting the teachings and morals of our respective faiths

to our respective younger generations. Indeed, we believe that there is urgent need further to explore ways of cooperation as suggested throughout the course of the Convocation.

"We believe that we stand at a crossroad in the affairs of men. We have no quick solutions for our problems, and we possess no immediate means for righting wrongs. We do, however, dare to demonstrate our faith that it is the will of God that those who believe in Him should live as brothers and work one with another toward the goals for mankind which He has disclosed, prominent among which is respect for the unalienable rights of men and the protection of all mankind from exploitation and abuse.

"We, therefore, in solemn Convocation assembled on this 27th day of April Anno Domini 1954 — Sha'aban the 24th in the Hijra year of 1373 — do constitute ourselves a continuing Committee on Muslim-Christian Cooperation and do pledge that under God we will work unceasingly, with mutual confidence and regard for the rights of others, to promote understanding and brotherliness between the adherents of Islam and Christianity."

Here ends the text of this historic Covenant which speaks for itself; and we pray that the flame lighted at Bhamdoun shall never be extinguished until all men of all heavenly faiths and all creeds get together to emulate the spirit of universal understanding under God. We, who are old and whose voice rings from the past, cede the torch to you who are young and full of vigor, that you may carry it across the years and in every walk of life with undaunted courage and conviction until you fill the whole world with light everlasting.

May I conclude my address by reverting to antiquity and quoting again Ptah-Hotep's final words which constitute an ardent prayer for his own son?

"Life safe and sound, be to thee."

Finis.

2nd week August

18th June 8

23 July.